

E
207
M5R3



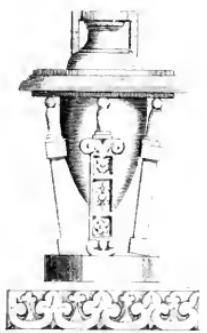


Class _____

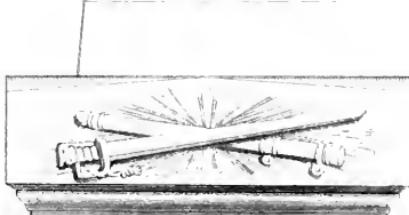
Book _____

GPO

532
23-65



3352524



*For the Eg
from his friend
H. B. Reed*

ORATION

DELIVERED

ON THE OCCASION OF THE REINTERMENT OF THE REMAINS

OF

GENERAL HUGH MERCER

BEFORE

The St. Andrew's and Thistle Societies,

BY WILLIAM B. REED,

Thursday, November 26th, 1840.

PHILADELPHIA:

FROM THE PRESS OF A. WALDIE, 46 CARPENTER ST.
1840.

Rep.

1757

Gen. MERCER was elected a member of the St. ANDREW'S
SOCIETY OF PHILADELPHIA, in 1757.

ORATION.

It was the pious enthusiasm of a Scottish pilgrim to revisit the graves of his country's martyrs, and freshen the record of their virtues, their suffering and glorious deaths. His pilgrimage was from churchyard to churchyard, and when his eye rested on the fading memorials of those who had virtuously lived and bravely died, his humble industry was ready to stop the progress of decay, and trace anew the epitaphs of the dead.

In a spirit not less reverential have we here assembled—Scotsmen, and the sons of Scotsmen, American citizens by adoption, and the children of those who have made America their adopted home,

have this day united to do honour to the memory of an illustrious man, who, coming hither a fugitive from persecution, found a welcome, and repaid that welcome with his blood, freely shed, in defence of the rights of those amongst whom he had found a refuge. To this high purpose is this solemn pageantry devoted. It is no vain pomp or idle ceremony ; it is the tribute of the grateful living to the honoured dead. And are there, in the heart of man, impulses more pure than those which prompt him sometimes to turn aside from the excitement of a busy day, and lead him in meditation to the graves of those who rest in indisputed honour ? Is there in the heart of the American people a principle more truly conservative than that which makes *all* bow with instinctive reverence at the shrine of the Revolution, and brings all, as we have come to-day, to the tombs of the revolutionary dead, without distinction of nativity, of sect, or party, to join there in sad and affectionate communion ? These graves, however distant, are in no foreign soil. The earth where these hallowed bones repose is the Mother Earth of the Nation. And there is growing from the graves of the Revolution a beautiful creeping plant which clings closely, and spreads widely, over a united land.

There is another high impulse in action here. This land, from its earliest settlement, has been a land of free and honourable refuge. Hither have come the fugitives from religious and political oppression—hither have come the enterprising of all lands,—the superfluous industry which pines away upon exhausted soil,—and here has the fugitive found protection, and enterprise its due reward. Could the history of transatlantic emigration be faithfully written,—if some true record could be kept of the sentiments, the opinions and impulses of the thousands and the tens of thousands who, in search of a new home, have crossed the ocean, it would have an interest beyond the fascination of romance. It would tell of many an agonised and many a grateful heart, of separation from the scenes and companionship of nativity, and of new sympathies in a strange land. It would tell of that sentiment which the mere recollection of common nativity can produce, which ripens into noble charities for the friendless stranger, and now brings us to the grave of one on whose birth and boyhood the same sun shone that gave light to ours.

HUGH MERCER was born near Aberdeen, in the north of Scotland, about the year 1723. He died

X on an American field of battle, on the 3d January, 1777. The record of his life, rich in incidents of heroism, it is my purpose here to unfold.

Less than one hundred years ago, the British Empire had a wide and peaceful sovereignty. Its metropolitan and colonial authority was secure and undisputed. The fruits of a revolution, which had changed the tenure of the sovereign and ascertained the rights of the subject, were realised in new limits to prerogative, new security to Parliament, new impulse to industry, and new protection to the people. The sober reason of the British nation approved the administration of the government. But between this sober judgment, with all the strength which gratitude for these blessings gave it, and the affections of the people, there was still a struggle; and the naturalised princes of the house of Brunswick, whom the revolution had placed upon the throne, from time to time were made to realise that sympathy for a family of exiled native princes was lurking in the bosoms of their subjects. In Scotland, bound to England by what was then thought an unnatural union, these sympathies were most active, and the memory of her native princes, loyalty to the name of Stuart—the sight of her deserted palaces—her buried crown and sceptre, were

cherished in the Scottish heart with devotion that burned not the less intensely because it burned in secret. There was scarcely a Highland dell or Lowland castle, where there were not secret worshippers kneeling in proud devotion at this empty shrine.

On the 19th July, ninety-five years ago, a small armed vessel appeared off the coast of Moidart. It came to anchor, and there landed on the Scottish shores a young and gallant Prince. He came to claim what he proudly called his own, and he claimed it through the affections of loyal Scotland. The banner which Charles Edward unfurled to an astonished people on the hills of Glenfinnan on the 19th August, '45, was an emblem from which adversity had purged the stains with which an ancestry of tyrants had disfigured it; and to the forgiving eye of loyal enthusiasm it seemed to float in the light of brighter and better days, the sunshine which the new dominion was to shed on darkened and oppressed Scotland.

It is easy for what is called the enlightened intelligence of this day, to look back with contemptuous pity on the enthusiasm which promoted and sustained this wild attempt; but who in the pride of historical presumption,—the insolence of doubt, will

question the true chivalry and romantic patriotism of the many gallant men, who, either without pausing to consider, or in defiance of their better judgment, espoused Charles Edward's cause, and hazarded their lives,—for the dread penalties of treason hung over all, the high and the low, the chieftain and the clansman, who shared in the bold effort of desperate enthusiasm. The brief history of this enterprise, the invading march, the sullen retreat, its young leader's rapid alternations of hope, of confidence and despair, justified by his miraculous victories and his bloody reverses, need not here be told. It is part of Scotland's household history, and is embalmed in the brightest and most beautiful fiction of Scotland's master mind.

On the night of the 15th April, 1746, two gallant armies were stretched in uneasy slumber on the moors of Culloden; the one the remnant of those enthusiasts, who in a cause which their gallantry ennobled had carried terror to the centre of the Empire; the other a well disciplined, well appointed army, led to sure victory by an experienced leader, and restless to wash away the discredit which frequent defeat had thrown upon them. On either side of that array was more than one brave man, who was destined to shed his blood in other conflicts

and on a distant soil. In the British army was Sir Peter Halket, who perished in Braddock's defeat on the banks of the Monongahela. Marching to the Pretender's standard was the young Master of Lovat, afterwards Major General Fraser, who now rests in an unknown grave on the heights of Saratoga. At the head of one of the English regiments was Colonel James Wolfe, the hero of Louisburg and Quebec—and by one of the Highland watch-fires in Charles Edward's camp there lay a stripling of twenty-three years of age—a youth who had left the peaceful occupation in which he was educated, to serve a bloody apprenticeship in the rebel cause. This young man was Hugh Mercer, then an assistant surgeon in the Highland army.

The horrors of the next day are known to you. It was Scotland's second Flodden field. The blood of her best and bravest sons was poured out like water, the Prince for whom their blood was generously shed became a proscribed wanderer, and his followers, those who escaped the carnage of that dark day, and the bloody penalties of the British law, like their Prince, were forced to seek in exile their only sure immunity.

Early in the following year Mercer bade Scot-

land an eternal farewell, and embarked at Leith in a vessel bound to Philadelphia. Of the circumstances of his emigration and arrival, nothing is known except that he left his native country in consequence of his participation in the rebellion, and that he settled on what was then considered the western frontier of this province near the present village of Mercersburg in Franklin county. Tradition has not told us the motives of this then remote and secluded residence, nor do we know in what occupation, or with what aim, Mercer was engaged, till we find him a captain in the Provincial forces which were raised on the breaking out of the French and Indian war of 1755.

The brief experience of irregular military life acquired in Charles Edward's enterprise was of value to a frontier settler, whose life was one of constant vigilance and exposure. For a series of years prior to the continental war, the Indian tribes on our western frontiers, stimulated by the artifices of French emissaries, were making constant aggressions on the settlements. The aid of the metropolitan government had been invoked and afforded, and Braddock's ill-starred enterprise had shown the inefficacy of the proud discipline of regular warfare against savages, whose defiance of dis-

cipline seemed to be the secret of their strength. From the Susquehanna to the Alleghany the unbroken forest was tenanted by hostile tribes, and scarcely a sun went down upon the settlements without the glare of some burning village, and the shrieks of women and children arising to break the gloom and silence of the night, until at last the colonial Legislature, harassed beyond endurance by these repeated inroads, determined to raise an adequate force, and by the vigour of their own arms give security to their citizens.

The victorious result which ensued is worthy of especial remembrance here, not only on account of its important consequences, but because it was achieved wholly by Pennsylvania arms. A battalion of three hundred men was organised and equipped, and despatched under the command of Colonel John Armstrong to penetrate the Indian country, and strike a decisive blow on one of their most remote and important positions.

The leader of this enterprise was one of the most remarkable men of his time. To fearless intrepidity of the highest cast, there was united in his character a strong sense of religious responsibility that rarely blends with military sentiment. He belonged to that singular race of men, the Scottish

Covenanters, in whom austerity was a virtue of high price, and who in the conflicts to which persecution trained them, never drew the sword, or struck a mortal blow, without the confidence which enthusiasm seemed to give them, that agencies higher and stronger than human means were battling in their behalf, and that their sword, whether bloodless or bloody, was always “the sword of the Lord.” Educated in these sentiments, John Armstrong never swerved from them. He was foremost in his country’s ranks, whether her cause was defence against a foreign foe, or revolt against oppression—in the colonial conflicts as well as in the war of the revolution. He was always known to kneel in humble devotion and earnest prayer before he went into battle, and never seemed to doubt in the midst of the battle’s fury that the work of blood was sanctified to some high purpose. Under this leader did young Mercer—for a common sympathy at least on this soil united the Jacobite and the Cameronian—fight his first American battle; and it was in the arms of the son of this his ancient general, that he was carried mortally wounded from the bloody field of Princeton.

The enterprise of the Pennsylvania troops in 1756, was one of peculiar interest. They marched

from Fort Shirley to the Alleghany river, through a country known to be hostile, and reached the Indian town of Kittanning, within twenty-five miles of the French garrison of Fort Duquesne, without the enemy being aware of their approach. The troops were immediately about the dawn of day led to the assault, and after a short and bloody conflict, in which most of the principal Indian chiefs were killed, and nearly every officer of rank among the provincials wounded, the town was carried by storm and utterly destroyed.

During the assault, Mercer was severely wounded, and being obliged to retire to the rear of the column, in the confusion incident to such warfare, he became separated from his men on the retreat, and found himself on the night of the battle, alone and wounded, and obliged to regain the settlements with no other guidance than that which nature gives to the solitary wanderer—the stars of heaven and the winter garb of the forest. In the official report made by Colonel Armstrong is the following return : “ Captain Mercer’s company—himself and one man wounded—seven killed—himself and ensign are missing.” But the spirit of the Scottish soldier, of one who had witnessed more ghastly scenes of carnage, and encountered worse perils than the forest

threatened, in the flight to Inverness when Christian savages tracked their flying victims, did not sink ; but though alone, faint with loss of blood and with a shattered arm, after reposing for a few hours on the field of recent conflict, he commenced his desolate pilgrimage. For days and weeks did he wander through the forest, dependent for sustenance on its roots and berries, until at last striking the waters which empty into the Potomac, he was enabled, when exhausted nature seemed just about to sink, to reach Fort Cumberland.

On the reorganisation of the provincial forces in 1758, when the daring spirit of the great man at the head of the English ministry seemed to be infused into every branch of the public service, Mercer, promoted to the rank of a lieutenant colonel, accompanied the army of General Forbes, and being present at the reduction of Fort Duquesne, was left by the commander in chief in charge of that important post. It was on this expedition that he became acquainted with Washington, then a colonel in the Virginia line, an acquaintance which soon ripened into intimacy, and exercised so vast an influence on his future career. How perilous a trust was confided to Colonel Mercer, and how faithfully and successfully he discharged it, may be inferred from

Washington's ominous declaration in a letter to Governor Fauquier, in December, 1758. "The general has in his letters," says he, "told you what garrison he proposed to leave at Fort Duquesne, but the want of provisions rendered it impossible to leave more than two hundred men in all; and these must I fear abandon the place or perish. Our men left there are in such a miserable condition, having hardly rags to cover their nakedness, and exposed to the inclemency of the weather in this rigorous season, that sickness, death and desertion, if they are not speedily supplied, must destroy them." Mercer maintained the post and remained with the garrison till it was relieved, when he retired from the service, and having permanently fixed his residence at Fredericksburg, in Virginia, resumed the practice of his profession.

We now approach the opening of the great chapter of American History.

The repose which the colonies enjoyed between the peace of 1763 and the beginning of the revolution, was short and restless. The young Nation lay, not in the slumber of exhaustion, but in the fitful sleep which the consciousness of a great futurity allows. It slept too with arms by its side, and there needed but the trumpet's feeblest note to

arouse it to action. The involuntary concord of the Colonies at the outbreak of the Revolution is one of its most singular characteristics. It was a concord that transcended all mere political relations—it was beyond and above all political union. It was the instinctive appreciation of common right, the quick sense of common injury. There seemed to be but one frame, and when the hand of tyranny was rudely laid on a single member, the whole system quivered beneath the contact, and braced itself to resistance.

The three great colonies, Virginia, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, differing in manners, habits and opinions on most topics, on this of resistance knew no discord; and the signal had scarcely been lighted at Lexington and Bunker Hill, when an answering fire started upwards from the shores of the Potomac.

The battle of Lexington was fought on 19th April, 1775, and on the 25th, six days later, the following characteristic letter was written to Colonel Washington, then by common consent regarded as the leader of all the Virginia forces, should she raise the standard of revolt. It is dated at Fredericksburg.

“By intelligence received from Williamsburg it appears that Captain Collins of his majesty's navy at the head of fifteen marines, carried off the powder from the magazine of that city on the night of Thursday last, and conveyed it on board his vessel by order of the governor. The gentlemen of the independent company of this town think this first public insult is not to be tamely submitted to, and determine with your approbation to join any other bodies of armed men who are willing to appear in support of the honour of Virginia, as well as to secure the military stores yet remaining in the magazine. It is proposed to march from hence on Saturday next for Williamsburg, properly accoutred as light horsemen. Expresses are sent off to inform the commanding officers of companies in the adjacent counties of this our resolution, and we shall wait prepared for your instructions and their assistance.

HUGH MERCER.

GEORGE WEEDON.

ALEX'R. SPOTTSWOOD.

JOHN WILLIS.”

On the 29th the volunteers of Albemarle, for the chivalry of Virginia was all in arms, sent

Washington a letter to the same effect, bearing the names of Gilmer, a name honoured then and honoured now, of Lewis, and Marks. Its postscript was, "We shall stand under arms till we have your answer."

In June, 1775, George Washington was chosen Commander in Chief, and early in the following year the American army then being in the neighbourhood of New York. Colonel Mercer received from Congress his commission as a Brigadier General. It is not improbable that his services were solicited at this juncture at the instance of Washington himself, as it appears from his correspondence, that the Commander in Chief repaired to Philadelphia to concert with Congress plans for the organisation of the army, and that he remained there until the day after the date of Mercer's commission, and those of two others of his most valued friends.* General Mercer soon left, and for ever, his peaceful home, his young wife and children, and joined the army at New York.

And now before approaching the closing scenes of an eventful life, let me for an instant pause, and

* Joseph Reed as Adjutant General, and Stephen Moylan as Colonel. Their commissions are dated the same day as General Mercer's—June 5th, 1776.

speaking to you, citizens of a peaceful age, to you soldiers of a peaceful land, to you ministers of a peaceful faith, let me ask you to think, and think gratefully, of the contrast of the even tenour of your lives to those who earned the blessings which makes your life a life of peace. For them there was no prosperous industry such as yours, no steady pursuit, no systematic economy. The frame of society was dislocated. The cloud of civil war hung low upon the land, and if a ray of sunlight victory sometimes broke forth to cheer the earth, it was answered by a lurid flash from dark masses impending elsewhere. There was no rest in the Revolution, and the gentle dawn of a peaceful Sabbath rarely brightened on the Christian heart. The only prayer which rose to Heaven was the prayer of the armed sentinel. Yet man, American man, repined not—home was abandoned—families separated—the husband and father left his fireside without a murmur. The selfish sentiment of this day, that the first duty of a citizen is to himself and his own interests, no one then dared avow. The native hue of resolution was sicklied with no pale cast of those poor thoughts which make even the virtue of God's ministers a cloistered virtue. That voice which we have all heard in the trembling accents of

extreme old age at a peaceful altar, spoke from the pulpit boldly to the men of the Revolution, and uttered within the walls of Congress the prayer of humble confidence to the God of righteous battles. To a Jesuit from St. Omers, was confided a public trust which he faithfully and gratefully discharged. The most eloquent man after John Adams and Patrick Henry in the old Congress, was a Scottish Presbyterian divine, whose intellect, strengthened in the fierce polemics of a Glasgow synod, had full sway and vast influence in the anxious deliberations of revolutionary council. And there is yet amongst us, one of the few whom time has left, a venerable man, a minister of religion, of that communion in one of whose temples I am now speaking, on whom age has fallen gently and the record of whose memory is rich with recollections of the sacrifices which the revolution exacted and received.* No monastic scruple kept these men from the performance of their public duties.

The tale of those endurances and sacrifices has yet to be written. Our military and civil history is studied and understood, but how few are there who know any thing of that household story of

* The Rev. Ashbel Green.

self immolation and devotion, which, as a moral theme, makes the chief value of the revolution's annals. There is many a rich tradition,—the yet unwritten story of those who, like Mercer, never from the commencement of the struggle left their country's service, generous and unrewarded men who devoted their prime of life as he did, and with broken spirits and disappointed hopes lay down in early graves. And rich indeed will be our recompense if the solemn ceremony of this day shall give vigour to the interest that America should feel in her early history, and new life to the great principle of republican loyalty which binding us together by veneration of a glorious ancestry, is the Republic's best security. The flag of the Nation is the shroud of the Nation's heroes. Its happy stars shine brightly o'er their graves.

Let me now return to the closing scene of our buried soldier's life.

The first campaign in which General Mercer participated in the continental service, was crowded with incidents of high interest. It immediately preceded the great change in our military policy which made the war one of offensive enterprise, and to no one more than to him is that change attributable. The battle on Long Island, the retreat

to New York, the evacuation of that city contrary to the advice of Mercer, who was perhaps wisely overruled, and of Greene whose bold counsel it was to burn the city to the ground, the battle of White Plains, the fall of Fort Washington, the projected attack on Staten Island confided to Mercer, and the retreat through New Jersey, were the prominent incidents of this eventful period. Throughout it all, Mercer was in active service under the immediate orders of the commander in chief, to whose affections he was closely endeared.

As early as the 8th of December, 1776, the broken remains of the American army had taken their last desperate position on the western bank of the Delaware, and gloomy and perplexed were its desponding councils. A large and well appointed British army had driven the few troops that remained in service before them through New Jersey, and the river, rendered more formidable by the floating ice, appeared to be the only barrier to their further advance. Congress, reduced in numbers, and broken in spirit, was losing its power of self-support, and Philadelphia, then the Nation's capital, seemed destined to a certain fall.

It was at a moment like this when, in worse than midnight gloom, terror and perplexity seemed

to sway the mind of man, that the influence of Washington was so sublimely realised. The ordinary virtue of the daring soldier was thrown into the shade by the rarer and brighter developments of his character; and Washington, at that moment of prevalent despair, himself desponding in spirit, but outwardly calm, collected and resolute, the recipient of rash and timid counsels, the guardian of a broken and dispirited army, the supporter and best counsellor of Congress, who, in this moment of extremity threw all the duties of a sinking state on him, is as fine a spectacle as the history of the world, ancient or modern, can exhibit.

The annals of the Revolution have no period of gloom like this. Evil counsels and insubordination aggravated Washington's just solicitude. Phantoms and realities alike perplexed the public mind. On the 10th of December he wrote to General Lee a letter of almost desperate supplication to induce him with his troops instantly to join the main body of the army, and on the 14th, relying on its success, he intimated in a letter to Governor Trumbull his intention, if Lee joined him, to make an offensive movement on the enemy. On the day before, Lee, then stationed at Basking Ridge, wrote to General Gates a letter, strongly characteristic of his ill

regulated mind, and of that spirit of morbid jealousy which was his ruin. "If I stay in this province I risk myself and army, and if I do not stay the province is lost for ever. I have neither guides, cavalry, medicines, money, shoes or stockings. Tories are in my front, rear, and on my flanks. The mass of the people is strangely contaminated; in short, unless something turns up which I do not expect, we are lost. Congress has been weak to the last degree. As to what relates to yourself, if you think you can be in time to aid the general, I would have you by all means go. You will at least save your army. It is said the whigs are determined to set fire to Philadelphia. If they strike this decisive blow the day will be our own, but unless it is done all chance of liberty in any part of the globe is for ever vanished."

The ink was scarcely dry upon this letter when Lee was made prisoner in his quarters by a party of British dragoons, and the hopes of the Commander in Chief of his co-operation entirely frustrated.

The situation of Philadelphia at this dark hour, it is not easy for us in this peaceful day to realise. A British frigate and sloop of war were at anchor within the Capes of the Delaware, and large bodies

of Hessian and British troops were encamped within a few miles in New Jersey. "It was just dark," says a military traveller who witnessed the desolation, "when we entered Front street, and it appeared as if we were riding through a city of the dead. Such was the silence and stillness which prevailed, that the dropping of a stone would have been heard for several squares, and the hoofs of our horses resounded in all directions." On the 12th and 13th December, General Putnam, then in command at Philadelphia, issued his memorable orders, which tell a ghastly tale of popular alarm.

"The late advances of the enemy oblige the General to request the inhabitants of this city not to appear in the streets after ten o'clock at night, as he has given orders to the picket guard to arrest and confine all persons who may be found in the streets after that hour. Physicians and others, having essential business after that hour, are directed to call at head quarters for passes.

"The General has been informed that some weak or wicked men have maliciously reported that it is the design and wish of the officers and men in the continental army to burn and destroy the city of Philadelphia. To counteract such a false and scan-

dalous report he thinks it necessary to inform the inhabitants who propose to remain in the city, that he has received positive orders from the honourable continental congress, and from his excellency General Washington, to secure and protect the city of Philadelphia against all invaders and enemies. The General will consider any attempt to burn the city as a crime of the blackest dye, and will, without ceremony, punish capitally any incendiary who shall have the hardiness and cruelty to attempt it. The General commands all able bodied men who are not conscientiously scrupulous about bearing arms, and who have not been known heretofore to have entertained such scruples, to appear in the State House yard at ten o'clock with their arms and accoutrements. This order must be complied with, the General being resolutely determined that no person shall remain in the city an idle spectator of the present contest who has it in its power to injure the American cause, or who may refuse to lend his aid in support of it, persons under conscientious scruples alone excepted."

Nor was Congress free from the infection of that hour of alarm. The published proceedings indicate the gloom which oppressed its deliberations. The secret resolves, as communicated to General

Washington, show at once the uncertainty of their counsels, and the far reaching sagacity of him whose conduct Congress professed to regulate. On the 11th of December Congress passed a resolution denouncing as scandalous a rumour which was then current, that they intended to leave Philadelphia. It was communicated to Washington, with a request that it should be published to the army. On the 12th he wrote to Congress, declining to accede to their request, and frankly saying, that in his judgment such a resolution and its publication were alike inexpedient. And on the next day Congress resolved to adjourn precipitately to Baltimore, and conferred on Washington full and unlimited powers to conduct the war as he pleased.

What secret thoughts, what hidden despair oppressed the mind of Washington, it is difficult to conceive. His letters, private and official, breathe the spirit of calm and abiding confidence, that the cause of liberty would yet prosper, though the means by which the result was to be achieved were unseen. “Our little handful is daily decreasing by sickness and other causes; and without aid, without considerable succours and exertions on the part of the people, what can we reasonably look for or expect but an event which will be severely felt by

the common cause, and will wound the heart of every virtuous American, the loss of Philadelphia." In a letter to his brother on the 18th, he says, "I have no doubt but General Howe will still make an attempt on Philadelphia this winter. I foresee nothing to prevent him a fortnight hence, as the time of all the troops except those of Virginia, now reduced almost to nothing, and Smallwood's regiment of Marylanders, equally as low, will expire before the end of that time. In a word, if every nerve is not strained to recruit the new army with all possible expedition, I think the game is nearly up. You can form no idea of the perplexity of my situation. No man ever had a greater choice of difficulties, and less means to extricate himself from them. But under a full persuasion of the justice of our cause, I cannot entertain an idea that it will finally sink, though it may remain for some time under a cloud."

It was at this desperate crisis, when hope seemed dead, that in the American camp the suggestion was made to change the policy of the war, and make a sudden movement on the detached outposts of the enemy, then scattered carelessly through New Jersey, from Brunswick to Trenton. With whom this plan originated, history has not precisely ascertained.

If, as is most probable, it was the counsel of despair, it may have had its origin in many a brave but desponding spirit. Certain it is, that it received its best encouragement from the success of an appeal made to the volunteers and militia of Philadelphia, who, to the number of more than 1500 men, marched to the camp near Trenton. At their head was that honoured band whose hereditary pride makes them this day the especial guardians of our buried soldier's dust.

As early as the 14th December the idea of an attack seems to have suggested itself to the mind of the Commander in Chief, but to have been dependent on a junction with General Lee, then supposed to be in the rear of the enemy, but who was really their prisoner. A living witness,* in a letter written to me within a few days, thus ascribes this movement. "Two or three days after we had crossed the Delaware there were several meetings between the Adjutant General and General Mercer, at which I was permitted to be present; the questions were discussed whether the propriety and practicability did not exist of carrying the outposts of the enemy, and ought not to be

* General, then Major, Armstrong, an aid of General Mercer.

attempted. On this point no disagreement existed between the generals, and to remove objections in other quarters it was determined they should separately open the subject to the Commander in Chief, and to such officers as would probably compose his council of war, if any should be called. I am sure the first of these meetings was at least ten days before the attack on Trenton was made.” On the 18th news of an intended attack were current in Philadelphia,* and on the 21st General Greene wrote from camp to the Governor of Rhode Island, that he hoped that an attack would soon be made.

On the next day the adjutant general, Colonel Reed, than whom no one possessed more of the confidence and affection of the Commander in Chief, wrote from Bristol a letter of urgent solicitation which no doubt expressed the sentiment of a large portion of the officers of the army, and indicated Trenton or its immediate vicinity as the best point of attack.† Such suggestions thus urged by his most valued friends—by Greene, by Mercer, and

* 18th —— Great numbers of country militia coming in to join General Washington’s army. News that our army intend to cross at Trenton into the Jerseys.—Christopher Marshall’s Diary, p. 122.

† See Sparks’s Washington, vol. iv. p. 542.

Reed, met with a ready response in the breast of Washington, and the plan of attack was soon concerted. The Philadelphia and New Jersey troops were to cross the Delaware below, while the main body of the army—if such a phrase be applicable to a remnant so meagre—under Washington, Mercer, and Sullivan, crossing above Trenton, were to attack the enemy there. But even then the hope of a successful issue seemed desperate; and two days before the battle, Washington wrote to Robert Morris in a tone of deep solicitude—“For God’s sake hurry on the clothing to my suffering men. Leave no arms or valuable papers in the city, for sure I am that the enemy wait for two events alone to begin their operations on Philadelphia. Ice for a passage over the Delaware, and the dissolution of the poor remains of my debilitated army.”

On the night before the battle, Washington wrote his last letter to the commander of the Philadelphia troops. “The bearer is sent down to know if your plan was attempted last night, and if not, to inform you that Christmas day at night, one hour before day is fixed for our attempt on Trenton. For heaven’s sake keep this to yourself as the discovery may prove fatal to us; our numbers, sorry am I to say, being less than I had any conception of, but

necessity, dire necessity may, nay must, justify an attack. Prepare your men and attack as many of their posts as you possibly can with any prospect of success. I have ordered our men three days provision and their blankets, for if we are successful, which Heaven grant, we shall push on."

The issue of that enterprise need not be told. It turned the tide of war and gave an impulse to popular feeling which was in strange contrast to previous despondency. Amid the darkness of a winter night did Washington lead the remnant of his shattered army on this desperate enterprise, and a brief and bloody conflict terminated in a glorious victory. The column of attack operating on the main street leading from Princeton, was commanded by Mercer, and became the most efficient in obstructing the retreat of the enemy.*

* In a manuscript in my possession in the hand writing of General Reed, is the following statement, "Colonel Rhal who commanded the Hessians at Trenton, and was mortally wounded in the affair of the 26th, died on the 27th, and his papers being brought to me, it appeared that he had received notice of the intended attack from General Grant at Princeton, which was very exact as to time, though mistaken as to circumstances, supposing it to be a detachment under command of Lord Stirling. However there was so much information as would have put a prudent commander on his guard. Nor in this did he altogether fail, but an accident wholly baffled his vigilance. A scouting party,

It would be inappropriate for me to trace in detail the military operations that immediately followed the victory at Trenton. It was no sooner won than the American army with their prisoners recrossed the Delaware and resumed their former position. Here they remained till the 29th when offensive operations were renewed. General Washington again entered New Jersey, and the British army advanced in full force, the advance parties being at Trenton, to recover the ground they had lost.

On the night of the 2d January, 1777, the American camp was the scene of anxious council. The panic which the unexpected blow at Trenton inspired had subsided, and the British army in full force had resumed their position, and looked forward to the next day for the consummation of their revenge. A small creek alone separated the two armies. Each seemed in deep repose, and the sentry of either camp as he paced his weary round

returning from the Jerseys to Pennsylvania, fell in with the Hessian picket and gave the alarm about two hours before the real attack was made. This being mistaken for the attempt mentioned in General Grant's letter, threw them into greater security than ever. The storm also induced them to get under cover, and lay aside their arms, especially as the day was considerably advanced before the attack began."

W. B. R.

looked out upon the watchfires of the enemy burning brightly and steadily, and felt assured that the presence of a vindictive or desperate foe ensured a bloody day to-morrow. Night had scarcely closed before a council of war was held by the Americans, and anxious attention bestowed on the only two questions then deemed worth consideration, whether a retreat were advisable, or whether the attack of a superior force should be encountered on this a field of recent victory. Each seemed alike desperate—the difficulty of their position was too apparent, the overwhelming force of the enemy rendered defence impracticable, and an almost impassable river, at least to an army in hasty retreat, in their rear, closed all avenue to escape. Then it was that Mercer threw out the bold idea that one course had not yet been thought of, and this was to order up the Philadelphia militia, make a night march on Princeton—attack the two British regiments said to be there under Lessley, continue the march to Brunswick, and destroy the magazines at that post. “And where,” was Washington’s question, “can the army take post at Brunswick—my knowledge of the country does not enable me to say?” It was then that General Sinclair gave a full and clear description of the

hilly country between Morristown and Brunswick, and the night march as suggested by Mercer was after brief discussion agreed to without dissent. Each officer hastened to the head of his corps and before the dawn of day the brilliant manœuvre thus suggested, gloriously for his country, fatally for himself, was successfully executed.

The night was dark and intensely cold. There was no moon, but the stars were watching from a cloudless sky the doings of that midnight hour. Sleep had begun to steal over the tired soldier of either army, but the steady eye of watchful discipline, the experienced ear that so easily detects a hostile movement, whether of attack or retreat, slept not. The British generals sure of to-morrow's victory, watched closely the camp of the Americans. The sound of the party working on the entrenchments at the ford was distinctly heard—the watchfires burned brightly and freshly, the sentinels were plainly seen marching steadily and silently, and all seemed well. The rebel victim was safe within the toils. But as the gray of the dawn was visible, and the first note of the British reveille was sounded, no answering drum was heard. A moment of expectation, and still no echo to the soldier's call—all was silent as

the grave—till suddenly there burst forth the strange sound of winter thunder in the British rear. “What can that firing be?” is said to have been Lord Cornwallis’s anxious and incredulous question. “My Lord,” was the prompt reply of Sir William Erskine, “it is Washington at Princeton.”

In that night march, to him who had suggested the movement was entrusted the command of the advanced party. As the day broke a large body of British troops was discovered apparently in march to Trenton, and after pausing to confer with Washington, who arrived on the field in a short time, the bold design was formed and executed by Mercer, of throwing his brigade between the enemy and their reserve at Princeton, and thus forcing on a general action. The movement was carried into effect. The fall of Colonel Hazlet, mortally wounded, at the head of his men, threw them into momentary confusion, and General Mercer’s horse being killed by the enemy’s fire, he was left alone and dismounted on the field. Disdaining to surrender, and indignant at the apparent confusion of his men, he encountered, single handed, a detachment of the enemy, and being beaten to the earth by the butts of their muskets, was savagely and mortally stabbed by their bayonets. The struggle of that day was

as brief as it was bloody, and with the loss of many of the bravest officers; of Hazlet, of Shippen, of Fleming, of Neal and Mercer, the American troops remained in possession of the field so hardly won.

With the story of victory I have nought to do. My duty is to the dying soldier. Within a short time, Major Armstrong, the general's aid, found him lying bleeding and insensible on the field. He was removed to a neighbouring farm, where he lingered in extreme suffering (the house being alternately occupied by British and American parties) till the 12th January, when, breathing his last prayer for his young and helpless family and his bleeding country, he expired in the arms of Major George Lewis, a fellow citizen of his beloved Virginia, and nephew of Washington.

Nor was his dying bed a bed of utter desolation. The house whither the wounded soldier was carried was tenanted, during that day, by two delicate females, who, wearing the garb and professing the principles of peace, were too brave to fly from the field of battle, or the bed of death. While the conflict raged around their humble dwelling, these two tender, helpless women, lost no confidence in the protection which the God of innocence rarely withholds—and when the dying warrior was brought to

their threshold and left beneath their roof, their ministering charities were ready to soothe his solitary anguish and smooth the passage to the grave. One of these American women of better times has died near Princeton within the last few months, aged upwards of ninety years. It was part of *her* household story that she had watched the death bed of a soldier of the Revolution.*

On the 14th of January the remains of Mercer were brought to this city, and on the next day but one were interred in the grave from which we have this day removed them.

There are aged men yet amongst us—so aged that before the brief remnant of this year expires the generation may cease to live, who remember the solemnity of that funeral. It was the Nation mourning for her first child. It was a people in sad amazement that a gallant citizen had indeed

* It appears that on the 15th, General Washington was not apprised of Mercer's death, for on that day he wrote from Morristown to Colonel Reed. "When you see General Mercer be so good as to present my best wishes to him and congratulations, if the state of his health will admit of it, on his recovery from death. You may assure him that nothing but the confident assertion that he was either dead, or within a few minutes of dying, and that he was put into as good a place as I could remove him to, prevented my seeing him after the action and pursuit at Princeton."—*MS. letter, 15th Jan. 1777.*

died for them. And when the ancient inhabitants of this city thus gathered in throngs to bear the soldier's mangled corpse to its place of rest, it was committed to the ground with the sacred service which bade them look to the promised day when "the earth and the sea shall give up their dead." The grave thus solemnly closed has been unsealed—affectionately, reverently, piously.—But yet upon the solemnities of this day, the reproach of a vain and profane pageant may fasten, if the mouldering remains of the dead can be placed in the midst of the living without stirring every heart to its very centre.

When in the turmoil of an ancient war, the affrighted attendants upon a burial thrust their burthen into the nearest sepulchre, the remnant glory which radiated from a prophet's bones gave life again to the cold and senseless corpse. But God's providence over man is not to be traced in miracles alone, for he has so framed the human heart that the visible presence of the heroic dust of a patriot martyr shall animate the lofty and spiritual emotions which too often are suffered to sleep and die.

There is a deep import in the commemorations which unite the living with the dead.

The first obsequies performed by our forefathers, more than sixty years ago, over the body of Mercer, with its death wounds fresh and bloody, taught to a struggling people the lesson of patriotic martyrdom. When we, their children, assemble for these new obsequies, the blood which was poured from those wounds has long since mingled with the earth —the blessings which it earned have been enjoyed by generation after generation, and not vainly will these solemnities pass away if their memory shall lead

“ to confident repose
In God, and reverence for the dust of man.”

A P P E N D I X.

A

No apology is necessary for the publication of the following letter. It has high and peculiar interest, and has never before appeared in print.

GENERAL WASHINGTON to ROBERT MORRIS.

Camp, above the falls, at Trenton, Dec. 22, 1776.

Dear sir,—Your favour of yesterday came duly to hand, and I thank you for the several agreeable articles of intelligence therein contained; for God's sake hurry Mr. Mease with the clothing, as nothing will contribute more to facilitate the recruiting service than warm and comfortable clothing to those who engage. Muskets are not wanted at this place, nor should they or any other valuable stores, in my judgment, be kept in Philadelphia, for sorry I am to inform yon, my dear sir, that unless the militia repair to the city for defence of it, I see no earthly prospect of saving it after the last of this instant; as that fatal vote of congress respecting the appointment of new officers has put the recruiting business upon such a footing, and introduced so much confusion into the old regiments, that I see no chance of raising men out of them; by the first of next month, then, we

shall be left with five regiments of Virginia, one of Maryland, Col. Hand's, and the remains of Miles's, reduced so much by sickness, fatigue, &c. as in the whole not to exceed, but fall short of 1200 men. Upon these and the militia is all our dependence; for you may as well attempt to stop the winds from blowing, or the sun in its diurnal, as the regiments from going when their term is expired.

I think with you, sir, (that however missed you may be in congress), your presence in the city cannot be dispensed with. I will give you the earliest information in my power of immediate danger; in the meantime I advise, for the reasons before mentioned, that you detain no papers that you can possibly do without—for I am satisfied, the enemy wait for two events only to begin their operations upon Philadelphia. Ice for a passage, and the dissolution of the poor remains of our debilitated army.

Gen. Sullivan is just come up with the troops under Gen. Lee, about 2000 men. Gen. Gates is here, and a small division under him of about 600 expected to-day; this, with about four or five-and-twenty hundred at most, here, before, compose the strength of my army, (the city militia excepted,) but this under the rose.

Alas, poor Lee! taken by his own imprudence! We have no distinct account of him: if any should arrive, Mr. Tilghman or I will communicate them to you. Insults accompanied the taking of him; since that I have heard that he was treated well by Lord Cornwallis, to whom he was first carried.

The commissary (Mr. Wharton) informs me that he cannot prevail on the millers to grind, and that the troops in consequence are like to suffer from want of flour; this, if I understand him, proceeds either from disaffection or an unwillingness to take continental money in pay, which in fact is the same thing; this must be remedied by fair or other means.

With sincere regard and esteem,

I am, dear sir,

Your most obedient,

G. WASHINGTON.

B

On the 31st January, 1777, congress passed the following resolution.

Resolved, That a committee of four be appointed to consider what honours are due to the memory of the late General Warren, who fell in the battle of Bunker's Hill, 17th June, 1775; and of General Mercer, who died, on the 12th instant, of the wounds received on the 3d of the same month, in fighting against the enemies of American liberty, near Princeton.

The members chosen: Mr. Rush, Mr. Heyward, Mr. Page, and Mr. S. Adams.

April 8, 1777.—The committee to whom it was referred to consider what honours should be paid to the memories of Generals Warren and Mercer, brought in a report which, being read, was agreed to as follows:—That a monument be erected to the memory of General Warren in the town of Boston, with the following inscription:—

In honour of
JOSEPH WARREN,
Major General of Massachusetts Bay.
He devoted his life to the liberties
Of his country,
And, in bravely defending them, fell
An early victim,
In the battle of Bunker's Hill,
June 17, 1775.
The Congress of the United States,
As an acknowledgement of his services
And distinguished merit,
Have erected this monument
To his memory.

That a monument be erected to the memory of General Mercer, at Fredericksburg, in the State of Virginia, with the following inscription:—

Sacred to the memory of
HUGH MERCER,
Brigadier General in the army of
The United States.

He died on the 12th of January, 1777, of the
Wounds he received, on the 3d of the same month,
Near Princeton, in New Jersey,
Bravely defending the
Liberties of America.
The Congress of the United States,
In testimony of his virtues and their gratitude,
Have caused this monument to be erected.

That the eldest son of General Warren, and the youngest son
of General Mercer, be educated from this time at the expense of
the United States.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 011 801 158 2